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The Rape Fantasy

The Cheat and *Broken Blossoms*

The narrative pattern most often associated with Hollywood dramas involving the "yellow peril" features the rape or threat of rape of a Caucasian woman by a villainous Asian man.[1] With roots deep within the Euroamerican melodramatic tradition, these fantasies present the white woman as the innocent object of lust and token of the fragility of the West's own sense of moral purity. However, these tales often point to a contradictory suspicion that the masochistic virgin may secretly desire her defilement. Much of the raw violence of these narratives, then, involves not only the eradication of the threat of racial otherness by lynching the Asian rapist but also the brutal punishment of the white woman through both the spectacle of her assault and the humiliation of her rescue.

Two of the most notable silent feature films dealing with interracial rape are Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat* (1915) and D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919). Although *The Cheat* xenophobically calls for the exclusion of people of color from the American bourgeois mainstream, while *Broken Blossoms* seems to ask for a more liberal toleration of some interracial relationships, both narratives use the fantasy of rape and the possibility of lynching to reaffirm the boundaries of a white-defined, patriarchal, Anglo-American culture. By looking at these two early film narratives, the nature of popular fantasies surrounding changes in both the racial composition of America and the place of women within the bourgeois patriarchy comes more clearly to the surface. However, before examining this narrative pattern in

detail, it may be helpful to look broadly at the melodrama to better understand how these films operate within this specific genre.

The Film Melodrama

A prodigious amount of critical scholarship exists on the film melodrama—its aesthetic form, principal auteurs, history and politics, and ideology. Because melodramas focus on domestic life and often feature female protagonists, it is not surprising that much of this scholarship has been done by feminist critics interested in ferreting out the patriarchal ideology underlying these films. Many of these studies have attempted to reconcile the film melodrama, which is directed to a predominantly female audience, with a moral universe in which women find themselves at odds with the male status quo. However, to understand the contradictions that exist within the Hollywood melodrama, its roots within the bourgeois domestic drama must first be understood.

In *The Social History of Art*, Arnold Hauser observes that the eighteenth-century domestic drama arose as a creation of the emerging bourgeoisie to be used as "an advertisement for bourgeois morality."[2] In *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, Peter Brooks expands on this:

> Melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue. It plays out the force of that anxiety with the apparent triumph of villainy, and it dissipates it with the eventual victory of virtue. It demonstrates over and over that the signs of ethical forces can be discovered and made legible. . . . Melodrama is indeed, typically, not only a moralistic drama but the drama of morality: it strives to find, to articulate, to demonstrate, to "prove" the existence of a moral universe which, though put into question, masked by villainy and perversions of judgment, does exist and can be made to assert its presence and categorical force among men.[3]

In contrast with feudal, aristocratic tragedy, which featured elevated heroes with fatal flaws, the melodrama depicted middle-class characters, victims of fate, or a specific, corrupt social institution. Linked to a struggling, revolutionary bourgeoisie that sought to assert its legitimacy by speaking for "everyone" in society, the melodrama often elevated the poor or the powerless to central positions. The home became the battleground for the moral struggles of this newly powerful social class. The domestic world, the cornerstone of bourgeois life, came under siege from outside threats to its existence. Sentiment and emo-

tional excess, ironic twists of fate or circumstance, became the hallmarks of these dramas in which the innocence of women was invariably at stake.

These dramas were set in the domestic sphere of the family rather than the public world of the court, the battlefield, or the factory for a specific reason. Since the bourgeoisie could not base its authority to rule on tradition, blood, or established feudal religious bodies, it created a secular religion out of domestic arrangements. Carefully separating the world of the family, child rearing, women, and the spiritual rectitude of hearth and home from the unscrupulous maneuverings of the public world of capitalism and the marketplace, the bourgeois patriarch legitimized his rule over both home and factory by pointing to the moral purity of his mate. Just as he had a "natural" right to rule his household and protect his spiritually elevated wife from any outside threat, he had a similarly unquestionable moral prerogative to rule in the outside world. Any taint from that public world could not corrupt him because of the sanctity of the domestic sanctuary he helped to protect and perpetuate through the accumulation of capital. Material success and the purity of the home replaced the purity of royal blood as the emblem of rule.

As a result, issues of legitimacy within the family took on an added significance. Not only did the bourgeois patriarchy need to control female sexuality to ensure inheritance but it also needed to be able to point to the bourgeois woman as the symbol of its moral certitude, purity, and secularized spirituality. Unlike the peasant or proletarian family, the bourgeois family completely separated women from the world of production. In the realm of reproduction, they served as deeroticized maternal figures, naive and childlike, constantly threatened by the external world that would surely destroy them were it not for the benevolent protection of the patriarch.

However, there are many important contradictions in this picture of bourgeois domesticity. For example, bourgeois ideology, to assure a pool of "free" wage laborers and freedom from government constraints on its economic interests, preaches individual self-determination. Clearly, if this concept of individual autonomy were extended to women, the patriarchy could be threatened. Indeed, women's elevated role as protectors of morality often did provide them with a "mission" to preach, teach, and otherwise voice their wisdom in public—to the chagrin of men who came under their attack. This same ideology of individualism, coupled with the disintegration of the traditional extended family as a unit of rural, domestic production, also led to the increasing visibility of women in the public world of production.[4]

Thus, ironically, the bourgeois family exists both as the justification of its class's right to rule and as the site of internal conflict and contradiction. The control of female sexuality, the assurance of the legitimacy and proper moral upbringing of the children, the vital separation of the world of reproduction from production, and the assurance of women's acquiescence to male rule all form an important part of the melodrama's thematic agenda. Forged in a period of intense ideological uncertainty, the melodrama has, throughout its history, been connected to a certain moral ambivalence and thinly disguised malaise about the bourgeois patriarchal family it apparently lionizes.

With the rise of cinema in the twentieth century, the melodrama continued to function as a viable vehicle for the articulation and containment of social contradictions involving class, gender, domesticity, and sexuality. Chuck Kleinhans points out in his essay, "Notes on Melodrama and the Family under Capitalism," that "in domestic melodrama we find the oppositions contained within the family, in the personal sphere, in a way that is at once dense and illusive. Repeatedly we discover very deliberately structured ambiguities in family melodrama."[5]

In fact, most recent criticism on the Hollywood melodrama has focused not on the melodrama's tendentious moralizing but on its ability to accommodate these "structured ambiguities" and to allow a certain space for the articulation of domestic discontent. In "Minnelli and Melodrama," Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, for example, summarizes the major thrust of the genre as follows:

> Melodrama can thus be seen as a contradictory nexus, in which certain determinations (social, psychical, artistic) are brought together but in which the problem of the articulation of these determinations is not successfully resolved. The importance of melodrama . . . lies precisely in its ideological failure. Because it cannot accommodate its problems, either in a real present or in an ideal future, but lays them open in their shameless contradictoriness, it opens space which most Hollywood forms have studiously closed off.[6]

Although a great deal of the critical work on the melodrama has looked at the interrelationship of class and gender within the genre and has focused on the threat feminine sexuality poses to the functioning of the bourgeois patriarchal family,[7] fewer studies of the domestic melodrama have taken up the potential threat racial differences may pose to the "typical," white, middle-class, American household. Although many excellent studies of specific melodramas do exist (including both the Sirk and Stahl versions of *Imitation of Life*[8]), much less critical

attention has been paid to the representation of either the nonwhite or the interracial couple in the Hollywood melodrama.

Nevertheless, racial difference, particularly when linked to issues of female sexuality or women's economic autonomy, has consistently appeared in Hollywood melodramas as an element of disruption to the smooth functioning of the domestic order. Therefore, a serious look at how Hollywood treats interracial relations within melodramas such as *The Cheat, Broken Blossoms*, and many of the other films discussed in this study may help to reveal how the genre depicts social tensions, allows ideological contradictions to surface, and attempts to handle them symbolically through the resolution of the plot.

The Cheat and the Pornography of Lynching

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye observes that a type of modern crime melodrama he labels "the brutal thriller" comes "as close as it is normally possible for art to come to the pure self-righteousness of the lynching mob."[9] Although Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat* (1915) is technically not a thriller, it does seem to capture the moral indignation, the melodramatic flourishes, and the invitation for arousal and catharsis necessary to bring it close to the type of fiction Frye describes. A lurid story of a bargain struck by an extravagant socialite with a Japanese merchant for cash in exchange for sex, *The Cheat* climaxes in a scene in which the white woman is branded by the Asian when she refuses to go through with the transaction. After she shoots her attacker, a trial ensues in which the socialite's husband takes the blame for her assailant's wound. Critics have noted that audiences for *The Cheat* would cry out during the famous courtroom scene in support of the mob that nearly lynches the Asian villain. A reviewer for *Moving Picture World*, for example, wrote, "One of the men that sat behind me in the Strand Theatre said, 'I would like to be in that mob.'"[10]

Indeed, the editing, cinematography, and mise-en-scène of the courtroom scene all seem to invite the audience in the theatre to adopt the perspective of the mob at the trial. Unable to control herself after her husband has been falsely convicted of shooting her attacker, Edith Hardy (Fannie Ward) becomes hysterical and rushes up to the judge's bench. She pulls down her dress to reveal the brand on her bare shoulder. A long shot of the packed courtroom stands in for the film audience. In medium close up, Edith pulls back her blonde curls to frame the brand on her pale shoulder. The film, then, cuts between shots of the violent gesticulations of Edith and medium shots of the faces of the jury, her assailant, and the anonymous, sneering faces of white men in

attendance. Their looks are directed at both Edith and Tori (Sessue Hayakawa), the man she accuses of her violation, and the camera positions both as objects of scrutiny (and, by implication, moral judgment) for the film viewers.

Ironically, the "lynch mob" in *The Cheat* forms within the "halls of justice," further legitimizing the viewer's shared perspective with the angry mob. When the judge sets aside the guilty verdict, the rioting mob turns into a cheering, appreciative crowd that flanks each side of the courtroom's main aisle as Edith and her husband, Richard (Jack Dean), walk toward the camera as an iris closes in on the couple to conclude the film.

In her essay, "Ethnicity, Class, and Gender in Film: DeMille's *The Cheat*," Sumiko Higashi notes that the courtroom crowd "recalls lynch mobs that murdered blacks."[11] In light of the commercial and critical success (as well as controversy) surrounding Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, which was released earlier that same year, public lynchings and moral indignation over interracial sexual relations seem to have been very much a part of the narrative lexicon of the American film in 1915. Unfortunately, accusations of interracial rape and mob violence against those suspected of it were a part of the social landscape of the day as well. According to Thomas F. Gossett, at its highest point in the recorded history of lynchings, 162 blacks as opposed to 69 whites were executed outside the legal system. From 1883 to 1915, the number of blacks lynched only fell below 50 in 1914, when the number was 14. According to Gossett's statistics, ten times more blacks were lynched between 1906 and 1915 than whites.[12] In 1913, Pitchfork Ben Tillman, governor of South Carolina, publicly supported the lynching of rapists and claimed "forty to a hundred Southern maidens were annually offered as a sacrifice to the African Minotaur, and no Theseus had arisen to rid the land of this terror."[13] Although the majority of blacks lynched during this period were not accused of rape or sexual assault, lynching, in the minds of Northerners as well as Southerners, became associated with rape. The sexual nature of lynchings, too, manifested itself in the tortures inflicted on the victims by the mob before their execution. This torture involved blindings and dismemberments of various sorts, including castrations.

In her essay, "'The Mind That Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape and Racial Violence," Jacquelyn Dowd Hall discusses the complex construction of rape and lynchings in the popular imagination.

> For whites, the archetypal lynching for rape can be seen as a dramatization of cultural themes, a story they told themselves about the social arrangements and psychological strivings that lay beneath the surface of

everyday life. The story such rituals told about the place of white women in southern society was subtle, contradictory, and demeaning. The frail victim, leaning on the arms of her male relatives, might be brought to the scene of the crime, there to identify her assailant and witness his execution. This was a moment of humiliation. A woman who had just been raped, or who had been apprehended in a clandestine interracial affair, or whose male relatives were pretending that she had been raped, stood on display before the whole community. Here was the quintessential Woman as Victim: polluted, "ruined for life," the object of fantasy and secret contempt. Humiliation, however, mingled with heightened worth as she played for a moment the role of the Fair Maiden violated and avenged. For this privilege—if the alleged assault had in fact taken place—she might pay with suffering in the extreme. In any case, she would pay with a lifetime of subjugation to the men gathered in her behalf.

> Rape and rumors of rape became the folk pornography of the Bible Belt. As stories spread the rapist became not just a black man but a ravenous brute, the victim a beautiful young virgin. The experience of the woman was described in minute and progressively embellished detail, a public fantasy that implied a group participation in the rape as cathartic as the subsequent lynching. White men might see in "lynch law" their ideal selves: patriarchs, avengers, righteous protectors. But, being men themselves, and sometimes even rapists, they must also have seen themselves in the lynch mob's prey.[14]

Although no actual rape or lynching is depicted in *The Cheat*, the film presents this fantasy of the violation of the white woman by a man of color in much the same way as the "Bible Belt pornography" described above. The passions exposed in the film's courtroom scene, moreover, are similarly ambivalent. This scene, in fact, seems to stand in isolation from much of the rest of *The Cheat*, which deals more with questions of consumption, female independence, changing marital mores, and the possible decay of the bourgeois family. Unlike the rest of the film, the final scene acts in a more elemental fashion as an apology for the group emotions that lead to racist acts of violence.

Even though the film pulls back from depicting an actual lynching, just as it declines to show Edith as a victim of rape, *The Cheat* still contains all the other elements associated with the public discourse surrounding rapes and lynchings at the time. The film serves, then, as a cinematic retelling of the public display and humiliation of the white victim coupled with the nearly uncontrollable rage of the white mob. Edith's husband serves as stoic patriarch and Tori functions as the rapist, finally exposed publicly, threatened with lynching, and implicitly punished suitably (i.e., legally) by the court. The mob action follows on the sexual arousal accompanying Edith's self-exposure and is, then,

expressed through violence toward Tori. Rage against the woman who uses her sexuality for her own gain, outside the boundaries of the patriarchal family, turns against the man of color, who becomes the embodiment of both a sexuality and a social order out of control.

As Hall points out above, men in the audience could see themselves as both moral avenger and rapist, since all the men in the film somehow both sexually possess and punish Edith directly or indirectly. Tori both possesses and punishes Edith by branding her; Edith's husband possesses her as his wife and punishes her by forcing her public humiliation; the mob in the courtroom possesses her as spectacle and punishes her with their humiliating stares.

Given that the period from the turn of the century through World War I saw a post-Reconstruction advancement of and subsequent backlash against African Americans as well as the rise of the woman's movement demanding reproductive as well as voting rights, it comes as little surprise that stories about rapes and lynchings would become so popular. Indeed, both acts of violence are linked in the popular imagination as agents for white male control over Caucasian women and men of color. In *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, Susan Brownmiller draws a striking parallel between rapes and lynchings:

> Rape is to women as lynching was to blacks: the ultimate physical threat by which all men keep all women in a state of psychological intimidation.
>
> Women have been raped by men, most often by gangs of men, for many of the same reasons that blacks were lynched by gangs of whites: as group punishment for being uppity, for getting out of line, for failing to recognize "one's place," for assuming sexual freedoms, or for behaviour no more provocative than walking down the wrong road at night in the wrong part of town and presenting a convenient, isolated target for group hatred and rage. Castration, the traditional *coup de grace* of a lynching, has its counterpart in the gratuitous acts of defilement that often accompany a rape, the stick rammed up the vagina, the attempt to annihilate the sexual core.[15]

Just as there seems to be an imaginative coupling of rape and lynching within public discourse, films and other fictions like *The Cheat* appear to serve the same double function as warnings to women that their independence leads to their humiliation and to blacks and other people of color that their desire to assimiliate into the American mainstream will never be tolerated. Beyond these warnings, however, the discourse on rapes and lynchings in the American popular media also brings white women and men of color together as transgressors against the domination of white men. Potentially, then, these fantasies hide a

resistant core underneath their brutal surfaces. If Tori and Edith somehow recognized their similar victimizations at the trial, then the moral universe of *The Cheat* would collapse. The tease of this possibility as well as its violent suppression fuel the passions explored within the film.

However, focusing exclusively on *The Cheat*'s conclusion does little to explain other aspects of the film fantasy. The specifics of its depiction of Japanese Americans, the Long Island social set, the world of Wall Street speculators, and the early-twentieth-century bourgeois home also exist as somehow related to the raw image of sexual humiliation and racist rage that ends the film. Thus, it becomes necessary to unravel how the threat of rape and the possibility of a lynching relate ideologically to these other aspects of the fantasy in order to understand the roots of any ambivalence felt during the film's denouement.

The Japanese Villain

As Sumiko Higashi has aptly pointed out in her analysis of ethnicity in *The Cheat*, the depiction of the assailant as Japanese was part of the yellow peril and anti-immigration rhetoric prevalent on the eve of World War I.[16] However, discourses on the issues of immigration, American imperialism, race, and ethnicity promulgated by the mass media, government, and other purveyors of ideology were highly contradictory. Such rhetoric as the "white man's burden," "manifest destiny," and the "yellow peril" coexisted with the ideals of the "melting pot," "liberty and justice for all," and the concept of the American Dream. Because of America's peculiar relationship with Japan and the military strength of Japan during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, fantasies involving that nation and its people proved to be particularly complicated. For example, although *The Cheat*'s villain was originally calculated to represent the height of evil as a *Japanese* threat to American identity, the villain's ethnicity was easily switched because of pressure from the Japanese government. Thus, when America entered World War I as an ally of Japan, the film's anti-Japanese intertitles were changed for the 1918 release print to make the villain Burmese.

This ambivalence predates World War I, however. America has had a particularly strong and peculiarly contradictory relationship with Japan and the Japanese since Commodore Perry forcibly opened up the country to trade with the United States in 1853. Japan has been seen as both a country of tremendous power, culture, and wealth with coveted merchandise ready to be commercially exploited and as a weak nation peopled by nonwhite, pagan, uncivilized inferiors also ripe for exploitation by expanding American capitalism. As the Meiji government of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century rapidly modernized the country, Japan's traditional policy of isolation and ban on emigration were lifted. Particularly after the institution of the anti-Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Japanese laborers immigrated to Hawaii and the West Coast of the United States in record numbers to take up the slack. Unlike the comparatively weak Chinese government, a strong Japanese position internationally enabled the country to protect its citizens abroad to a certain degree. Moreover, in order to set its citizens apart from the maligned Chinese, Japan scrutinized all potential émigrés carefully and encouraged the emigration of women to prevent the social problems associated with Chinatown's "bachelor society," for example, prostitution, gambling, opium smoking, and general vice.

Few of these measures, however, eased anti-Japanese sentiments. Particularly after Japan's stunning defeat of Russia in 1905, American observers began to worry about the expansionist tendencies of an Asian country that had not been colonized by the West yet had still managed to defeat a major European power in battle. Seeing Japan as a threat to its interests in the Philippines and Hawaii, the American government had to respond cautiously both to domestic calls for the exclusion of the Japanese from the United States and Japan's insistence on equity made from an uniquely powerful position among the nations of Asia. In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt worked out the "Gentlemen's Agreement" with Japan that restricted the immigration of laborers to the United States. However, "picture brides," other relatives of Japanese workers already in the United States, merchants, scholars, and students were still allowed to enter, and the Japanese were not excluded altogether until 1924.[17]

This ambivalence toward Japan and the Japanese finds its way into the depiction of Hishuru Tori. Both brutal and cultivated, wealthy and base, cultured and barbaric, Tori embodies the contradictory qualities Americans associated with Japan. Like Japan itself, Tori is powerful, threatening, wealthy, and enviable; however, his racial difference also codes him as pagan, morally suspect, and inferior. Moreover, just as Japanese attempts to assimilate Western technology and material culture to strengthen itself economically and militarily during the Meiji era posed a threat to American domination of Asia, Tori's attempts to adapt to and adopt elements of Western society also pose a threat to America's conception of itself. Like any new Asian immigrant seeking to assimilate into the mainstream, Tori threatens America's definition of itself as white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant.

Beyond this, Tori poses a further danger to America's national identity by being able to transcend racial boundaries and move fairly easily between Japanese and American cultures, obtaining possessions

and gaining status from both worlds. In the title sequence, Tori is introduced in Japanese dress with Asian-style brass brazier, poker, and ivory statuette. Key lights set off his facial features as well as these tokens of his ethnicity against the black background.[18] The chiaroscuro lighting adds to Tori's exoticism, mystery, and the implicit danger conjured up by the peculiar satisfaction he seems to get from branding his possessions.[19]

However, if Tori is associated with darkness, shadows, and the threatening exoticism of Japan in the title sequence, his introduction within the narrative itself shows him in quite a different light (literally). In the flat, high key lighting of daytime, Tori drives up to the Hardy residence in a sporty roadster. Shown in a medium long shot from a high angle, Tori looks like any other wealthy, insouciant young man in a Hollywood film of the time. Because of the distance of the camera, his racial otherness is barely noticeable. Jauntily, he gets out of the car and walks up to the house. Wearing a long duster, cap, casual tweed suit, and bow tie, his relaxed appearance belies any threat he might pose to the American bourgeois domestic sphere he enters. His body language (the self-assured way he perches on the drawing-room desk, the implied intimacy of his picking up Edith's purse and parasol) points to his ability to insinuate himself into this world with apparent ease.

An earlier title indicated that Tori was one of the darlings of the Long Island society set, and the implication is that he gained entry into this world not only from his wealth but also from this ability to "blend in" and create a certain intimacy between himself and Edith, who serves as his liaison with this otherwise racially "exclusive" society. This Americanized Tori innocently attends Edith by holding her coat and accessories, patting her hand, agreeing to help further her status in her set by hosting a charity ball, and unthinkingly grabbing her when she stumbles. Implicitly unable to find a place within the more rigidly racist society of the men on Long Island, Tori finds his niche among the women. However, although his feminization seems to confirm his symbolic castration, it also holds within it the potential threat of an ability to transgress gender along with racial barriers. Tori promises a different type of masculinity (soft, effeminate yielding, "Asian") that may displace the banal paternalism represented by Edith's husband.

When contained within his exclusively Japanese domain, Tori poses no threat, however. In the title sequence, he exists as a self-contained image of otherness outside the narrative. Similarly, when Tori appears as Edith's completely assimilated companion, he functions as what Eugene Franklin Wong has termed the Asian eunuch, an asexual, subservient foil for the white protagonists.[20] Accepted as escort, confidant, and pet in white society, Tori poses no threat to its racial exclusivity

because he appears to be totally asexual. Edith's ability to take his apparently innocent loyalty to her for granted is validated by a tradition in American popular culture of emasculated, faithful Asian servants and companions.

Separation of the two spheres, Japan and the West, seems to be the ideological key. When Tori begins to embody both, to merge both into a figure that can no longer be excluded as completely alien or assimilated as impotent and harmless, he becomes a provocative villain. At the charity event held at his mansion, Tori, elegantly dressed in tuxedo, white tie, and patterned vest, moves between two worlds—the American social set of society matrons and stuffy stockbrokers all in Western attire enjoying themselves in the large ballroom and his own private study filled with a large statue of Buddha, incense, rich silks, ivory figurines, and a potted tree with falling petals resembling Japanese cherry blossoms.

When Edith steps into his parlor, she enters a world that offers the forbidden possibility of a meeting of Japan and America within the sexual realm. For a moment, the fantasy seems to be more enticing than dangerous. When Edith caresses a piece of Japanese cloth and Tori gives it to her as a gift, her willingness to be seduced by Tori's wealth and sensuality seems evident. Although Edith backs away as Tori describes the branding of his possessions, she does not leave. Perhaps this can be read as an interest in Tori's brooding, implicitly sadistic sexuality outweighing her fears.

The moment is interrupted when a stockbroker, who had talked her into gambling away Red Cross charity funds on the stock market, comes in to tell her that she has lost the stolen money. The broker leaves, Edith faints, and Tori takes advantage of the opportunity to kiss the unconscious Edith. Much has been made of rape fantasies, their appeal to women, and the sadistic sexuality of silent screen stars like Rudolph Valentino, Erich von Stroheim, and Sessue Hayakawa.[21] The fantasy has been discussed as the internalization of a patriarchal ideology that insists on female passivity and submission to male domination, as an expression of some deep-rooted masochistic desire, and as a way in which society toys with forbidden sexuality to make it acceptable as "punishment" rather than as "pleasure." Whatever the psychological roots of the rape fantasy's appeal to male and female viewers may be, it clearly both disturbs and fascinates, and it plays a key role in Hollywood's depiction of sexuality.

In this case, *The Cheat* links the crossing of racial boundaries with the rape fantasy. It plays on all the ambivalence associated with that fantasy. On the one hand, Edith seems drawn to all those things repressed in her white, American, bourgeois home, for example, open

sexuality, the sensual pleasures of clothing, and other objects of consumption. In light of the rapidly changing sexual mores and life-styles of the World War I era, a certain amount of guilt and desire would likely be a part of any erotic fantasy involving a character like Tori. Tori represents indulgence of the senses, of the body, free from the Protestant denial of sexual desire. However, a willing affair with Tori would all at once completely subvert those strictures, ripping apart marriage, the bourgeois family, the Protestant ethic, as well as the racial status quo.

Although a fantasy that toys with this extreme would likely be inviting to many in the audience (women, the working classes, people of color) for a number of reasons, the pull to contain it wins out ideologically. Thus, a desired indulgence may come with the kiss, but it is still a *stolen* kiss, taken not given. As in many Hollywood narratives, forbidden desires find their fulfillment against the will of the protagonist. In this case, Edith can remain a part of the white, bourgeois family because this kiss can be read as a rape rather than the culmination of a love affair.

Moreover, while the kiss for women can be looked at as a fulfillment of secret, forbidden desires for the pleasures and freedoms promised by a love affair with a man of another race, it also marks the beginning of Edith's punishment and the turning point that moves away from any ambivalence about Tori's villainous character that may have been felt earlier. Here, Tori emerges as the archetypal "yellow peril" ravisher of white women. The object of desire, he too becomes the instrument of punishment for that forbidden desire. For male viewers, he can freely indulge sadistic desires "guiltlessly," "naturally," since he is Japanese and beyond Christian notions of morality. He can punish the wayward Edith without violating any code of chivalry, leaving her husband (and, by implication, the white men in the audience) pure. Thus, Tori's ethnicity becomes a necessary part of his ability to fulfill a number of erotic desires for both male and female spectators. His racial otherness allows him to function as a symbol of erotic indulgence and as an instrument of punishment for women's sexual self-assertion. Thus, white men can be free of the dark, brutal side of their own sexuality while maintaining the gender status quo through the threat of rape linked to the supposedly perverse sexuality of the Asian male.

However, the fantasies surrounding the Japanese villain Tori may be even more complicated than this. If Tori's sadistic, punitive masculinity functions to maintain patriarchal strictures legitimately tied to the white male authority of Edith's husband, then the subservient, eunuch-like, impotent aspect of Asian masculinity also associated with the character brings him closer to Edith's position on the social hierarchy.

Figure 1. The sinisterly elegant Tori (Sessue Hayakawa) threatens Edith Hardy (Fannie Ward) with exposure in The Cheat *(1915). Still courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.*

As in many rape fantasies, this offers a peculiar invitation to women to identify with the attacker, to see themselves as pitted against the same authority that he opposes in trying to possess her.

Frightened by the apparition of her husband silhouetted on the sliding paper panel (shoji) doorway as she regains consciousness in Tori's arms and hears the confirmation of her monetary loss, Edith allows herself to be persuaded to agree to Tori's bargain. Although it is never explicitly spelled out, the assumption is that Edith will give herself to Tori sexually in exchange for ten thousand dollars. Visually on the same side of the shoji, Edith and Tori, duplicitous, self-serving, and self-indulgent, are also on the same side morally. Neither can fulfill his or her desires within the bounds of the white bourgeois patriarchy represented by the husband on the other side of the screen.

The visual and moral equivalence between Tori and Edith becomes absolutely clear during the branding and its aftermath. Not unlike the trial scene, this part of the narrative plays with the mercurial nature of the positions of victim and vanquisher in the rape scenario. Again,

Tori's costume, which combines Asia and the West with a white tie and tuxedo shirt covered by a Japanese kimono, indicates the possible transgression he represents, that is, the sensual meeting of Japan and America, the erasure of racial borders through eroticism. Edith is dressed in a black gown covered by a white wrap. The contrast not only indicates her divided, duplicitous nature but also points to the racial contrasts at issue—the dark and the light.

When Edith arrives at Tori's home, she brings the $10,000 she has finally gotten from her newly wealthy husband. Although her offer to pay Tori with money instead of herself is refused, the existence of the check places her on an even footing with him. If Tori was below Edith socially before their bargain was struck and above her financially afterward, they, at this point, have attained a certain financial, moral, and social equality.

The balance struck, the film teeters between masochistic and sadistic positions for both Tori and Edith. When Edith masochistically responds to Tori's advances with a threat to kill herself, Tori offers her a pistol from his desk. However, whether the offer is a sadistic taunt or a masochistic invitation for her to shoot him remains unclear. They struggle. Tori grabs Edith, and Edith strikes at his face and beats him with an iron poker. Tori pulls back Edith's hair, revealing her white shoulder, takes the hot poker from the brazier, and, with the camera

Figure 2. Edith finds her own revenge as she shoots Tori—her brand clearly visible on her left shoulder. Still from The Cheat *courtesy of George Eastman House.*

fixed on his face, drives the poker down into her flesh (offscreen) and withdraws it. In a wider shot, Tori flings Edith to the tatami floor; the camera pulls back to a high angle shot of her clutching her burned shoulder. She picks up the gun and shoots Tori (offscreen). In a shot paralleling Edith's violation and fall to the tatami, Tori clutches his shoulder and falls to the floor. With this play of anger, violation, and revenge, both parties, technically at least within the narrative economy, seem vindicated. Both have been "cheated" and both have "cheated." Each has exacted revenge on the other. In fact, both find themselves in this position because of the overpowering control of the white, bourgeois, patriarchal status quo, which forbids any resolution of either Tori's desire for Edith or Edith's desire for independence, wealth, and sensualism through any means other than violence. Indeed, Sumiko Higashi views the parallel shots as a "visual example of how both characters share inferior status under white male hegemony."[22]

DeWitt Bodeen, writing on Hayakawa's performance in *The Cheat*, notes that "the effect of Hayakawa on American women was even more electric than Valentino's. It involved fiercer tones of masochism as well as a latent female urge to experience sex with a beautiful but savage man of another race."[23] Although this may be the case, perhaps the pleasure in watching Hayakawa's Tori in *The Cheat* comes, too, from both a sadistic desire to dominate a brutal man and a recognition of a status similar to that of nonwhite men within mainstream American society. Like Valentino, Hayakawa is depicted as a beautiful, engaging specular object—feminized (perhaps homoerotic) but also able to arouse the sexual interest of women because of his masochistic vulnerability as well as his sadistic mastery. Indeed, Hayakawa, here, may promise the same sort of subversive pleasure Miriam Hansen sees as part of Valentino's particular appeal to female spectators of the post-World War I era:

> In making sadomasochistic rituals an explicit component of the erotic relationship, Valentino's films subvert the socially imposed dominance/submission hierarchy of gender roles, dissolving subject/object dichotomies into erotic reciprocity. The vulnerability Valentino displays in his films, the traces of feminine masochism in his persona, may partly account for the threat he posed to prevalent standards of masculinity.[24]

By the time Edith makes her escape and her husband appears on the scene to save his wife (who has already avenged and "saved" herself), Tori has become a completely emasculated figure. Ironically, no potent Asian rapist exists for Edith's husband to vanquish. Instead, Tori appears as a fallen shadow on the shoji screen; a trickle of blood

seeping through the paper signals his wound. When Edith's enraged husband bursts through the screen door, this classic gesture of the chivalrous white patriarch coming to "save" the threatened white woman from the "fate worse than death" seems empty.

Thus, although Edith is brought back into the white bourgeois patriarchy on the arm of her husband during her final march down the courtroom aisle, the foundations of male domination have already been shaken by her actions and the sadomasochistic play of the fantasy. Her husband's stoicism has been totally ineffectual. Even though Tori and her husband have both tried to punish and contain her, Edith has managed to defy both, so that the success of her reabsorption into the bourgeois family must remain at least somewhat problematic.

Wounded, exposed, and nearly lynched at *The Cheat*'s conclusion, Tori returns to his place as the emasculated Asian male. The threat he has posed to the white status quo has been obviated. However, interestingly, despite the male figures of judge, jury, enraged mob, and husband, it is the white woman, Edith, who finally acts as the instrument of his castration. Complications, then, arise. Edith may be punished for her independent decision to become involved with Tori, but she is vindicated for her equally independent actions of shooting Tori and publicly assuming responsibility for her revenge. The racist aspect of *The Cheat*, coupled with a call for female self-sufficiency, seems linked to certain elements in the suffrage movement, which pointed to the potential threat of the political power of African Americans and new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe as a reason to grant white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon women the vote. Similarly, women viewers may look at this triumph over the Japanese villain as an apology for emancipation, since Edith's husband has been so completely ineffectual in protecting his wife, or as an acceptable expression of a desire to dominate men, to indulge in a sadistic fantasy usually denied them. From a totally different perspective, men in the audience might look at both contact between the races and female emancipation as an explosive combination that the text rightly condemns. Whether Edith's final outburst in court, then, can be looked at as an ambivalent nod toward the necessity of female independence or as a racist call for increased vigilance because of threats to the purity of the white woman seems moot.

Looked at either way, however, Edith functions as the gateway into American society that excludes those who cannot fit in because of their race or ethnicity. *The Cheat* gives the white woman this charge, then, to include and exclude the foreign, the alien, and the unacceptable through her sexuality. Thus, the text can simultaneously acknowledge, exploit, and condemn women's increased visibility in the public sphere,

as well as their growing demands for sexual self-expression, by placing Edith in the shadow of the Asian villain, who both threatens and embodies all those secret desires that put the white patriarchy on unsteady ground.

Indulge: The Perils and Pleasures of Consumerism

In his essay, "Orientalism as an Ideological Form: American Film Theory in the Silent Period," Nick Browne observes, "The imaginary of the movie world linked and intermingled exoticism and consumerism . . . for cultural possession and incorporation of the ancient wealth of Asian sexual secrets and material life. The Orient served as the emblem of a deepening re-territorialization of desire."[25] As Browne notes, *The Cheat* does not stand as an isolated case of interest in Asia and Asian themes in Hollywood around World War I. Rather, the film is part of a broader interest in the "Orient" found in theater design, popular theories of the cinema, set design, as well as actual narrative themes. Also, as Browne points out, Hollywood seemed to be using this Orientalism to attempt to financially exploit and ideologically intervene in the crisis occasioned by the growth of a modern, consumer-oriented society in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

As Lary May shows in *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry*,[26] the film industry played a key role during the silent era as a vehicle for the dissemination of a new ideology of consumption. Unlike the Victorian glorification of self-sufficiency, hard work, abstinence, and frugality for the respectable middle classes, shifts in the nature of the economy with the rise of corporate capitalism occasioned a change in values. As fewer members of the nominal middle classes owned and operated their own enterprises, the definition of the self through labor became as impossible for the bourgeoisie as it had been for the working classes previously. However, with the rise of the corporate middle classes came an increase in disposable income for a wider segment of the population, a growth in leisure time, and a redefinition of the individual through the consumption of mass-produced commodities rather than through productive enterprise. The domestic sphere began to shift from a site of small-scale production, spirituality, or reproduction to a site of leisure, consumption, and individual autonomy. Always part of a sexual economy of exchange within the patriarchy, women's importance as commodities themselves increased with a new emphasis on family life and sex as recreational. Beautiful (rather than spiritually transcendent, morally pure) women functioned as symbols of wealth and status

among the bourgeoisie. Moreover, women also became the chief consumers within the household. They were placed in charge of seeing that the family maintained its status through the acquisition of commodities.

Certainly, this new role put an added burden on working class, minority, and new immigrant women.[27] Although consumption promised an entry into the American mainstream through the acquisition of the appropriate commodities, the consumer society also brought the additional burdens of an inferior economic status and the vicious cycle of working more to consume more with time to enjoy the cherished commodities less. Also, even though consumption seemed to promise acceptance into a democratic melting pot of a homogeneous mass culture, grave social divisions continued to exist. The upsurge of reactionary sentiments against women and minorities already noted above as part of a pattern that gave rise to lynching, for example, could never be countered by acquiring the *right* house, the *right* clothes, or the *right* automobile.

The cinema moved into the ideological maelstrom occasioned by these economic and social changes by providing both models for an idealized society of consumption and comforting, Victorian reassurances of the perils of indulgence and materialism. Designed to turn a profit by providing fantasies that could draw in a demographically diverse audience, these films offered elements of identification for the middle classes as well as the proletariat, for men as well as women, the old and the young, for new immigrants, people of color, and others designated as "foreign" by the American mainstream. Women, recent immigrants, and other "outsiders" played key roles in films that occasionally dealt explicitly with the tremendous social rifts within American society. Thus, another level of ideological contradictions involving the foreign and the domestic became intertwined with the contradictions arising from the legacies of Victorianism and the new consumer ideal. As May notes, "As both men and women began to question the older definitions of success and the home, they were reevaluating their relationship to foreign cultures."[28] In addition to representing a threatening assault on traditional Anglo-Saxon American values, foreign cultures also promised release from Victorian constraints and an implicit permission to indulge oneself sensually through the consumption of exquisitely exotic commodities.

During the silent era, the name of Cecil B. DeMille became inextricably linked with film fantasies that exploited the ideological contradictions arising out of the economic and social changes of the time.[29] Indeed, *The Cheat* can be looked at as one of his comparatively early forays into this territory. Dealing with the lives of the haute

bourgeoisie, *The Cheat* promises a respectability and seriousness that stepped beyond the motion pictures' earlier designation as a principally working-class entertainment.[30] However, this interest in the Long Island "smart set" also offers those viewers far removed from that lifestyle a vicarious look at it as a model for consumption. Lavish houses, fashionable clothes, elegant furnishings, eleborate garden parties and balls, and sporty automobiles all play key roles within the mise-en-scène of the film.

Moreover, Edith provides a point of identification for all those women in the audience encouraged to look at consumerism as their vocation, while, at the same time, they are compelled to consider this consumption of commodities extravagant, frivolous, and potentially dangerous. Presented to the viewer as a beautiful commodity herself, Edith ironically gets into trouble precisely because of her desire to keep up this appearance of desirability, that is, to dress fashionably by spending exorbitant sums on clothes. Even before Tori enters the narrative, Edith's frictions with her husband are presented as stemming from her manic consumerism. In a telephone conversation, in which they are both physically and ideologically separated, Richard begs Edith to economize. A title spells out Edith's reply: "If you want me to give up my friends and social position—well—I won't." Edith's consumerism separates her from her overworked husband in a world of leisure and style that he has little part in. In fact, her acquisition of commodities threatens his authority over her because she is able to define herself and her own identity through a style created from those commodities. Thus, although Edith remains dependent on her husband for cash, consumerism gives her a certain degree of autonomy from the role of bourgeois housewife.

Later, Edith remarks to Tori, "The same old story—my husband objects to my extravagance—and you." Thus, Edith's indulgence of an interest in the foreign, in Asia, becomes equated with her self-indulgent consumerism. This link between racial otherness and the moral tensions associated with consumerism clearly has its roots outside the text. An interest in the foreign in general and in Asia in particular marked an ideological break with Victorian restraint. Moreover, this link between racial difference and consumption had overtly sexual overtones. Part of the pleasure of this display of wealth came from the exhibitionist joy of self-adornment. Through consumption, Edith becomes an envied aesthetic object herself. Unlike the prim Victorian housewife, Edith freely displays her erotic allure through lavishly feathered and bejeweled costumes. Further, Edith is "Orientalized" by her involvement with the wealthy aesthete Tori, who encourages her material indulgences. The more Edith consumes the more

she becomes drawn into Tori's world of beautiful objects and the sensual pleasure offered by his collection.

Edith moves between Tori and Richard as a coveted, living possession, lending legitimacy to two different life-styles. Not only do Richard and Tori embody different styles of patriarchal domination (Richard's chivalry and paternalism in contrast to Tori's sadism and sensuality) but these different styles of masculinity appear to be linked to their different relationship to the economy. Whereas Tori offers the promise of instant gratification of desires, material opulence, and constant leisure, Richard, tied to his office rather than to his possessions, still clings to the Protestant work ethic, delays gratification, and suspects excessive indulgence.

If both Tori and Richard are part of the new consumer order, Richard represents a corrective to Tori's excesses. He acts as a mediator between the old economic order based on Victorian notions of restraint and hard work and the new consumerism linked to leisure, indulgence, and consumption. Thus, Tori and the Asian objects that surround him act as a metaphor for the suspect nature of these economic changes that seem to call for the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant middle classes to abandon their traditional values of thrift and self-denial and become more like the Victorian's dark image of otherness represented by Tori and his sumptuous displays of power, wealth, and eroticism. When Tori is vanquished at *The Cheat*'s conclusion, this shadowy aspect of the new economy vanishes with him, and the nouveau riche Richard is free to allow his wife to consume at will.

In *The Cheat*, sexuality and economics parallel one another and are inextricably linked together within the narrative. For example, Tori's "Oriental" extravagance not only transgresses Victorian prohibitions against self-indulgent displays of wealth but also marks him as transgressing gender boundaries by moving into a world of consumption associated with the domestic world of women. Thus, Richard's white, Anglo-Saxon, semi-Victorian, protective masculinity stands as a corrective to the imbalances in the racial, economic, and gender order Tori represents. In addition, Edith's flirtation with interracial sexuality and excessive consumption threaten the sex-gender as well as the economic system. Like Tori, she represents an excess. She confronts the Victorian values at odds with consumerism too directly. However, unlike Tori, who can be eliminated as the "other," Edith must be brought back within the bounds of the system in order to insure its continuation and legitimacy. Thus, when the "spent" Edith walks down the aisle with her husband at the end of the film, she affirms her subordinate place in the new order as the consumer held in check by the new

speculative capitalist who can balance traditional values with the new consumerism.

Within patriarchal culture[31] and, as a consequence, within Hollywood films,[32] women circulate like commodities. The exchange of women affirms some social ties and forbids others. Within Hollywood films, the acquisition of the female protagonist legitimizes certain ideological positions and marginalizes or deprecates others. In *The Cheat*, Edith functions as the ultimate commodity, the ultimate token of legitimacy and desirability. From this point of view, her attraction as an object to the collector Tori seems appropriate; he allows her to "be herself," that is, a beautiful object unfettered by pecuniary concerns. When Tori brands her, however, he takes possession of her illegitimately, and she becomes stolen property. The branding acts as consumption out of control, and Edith must be repossessed as a commodity as well as reined in as a consumer in order for the economic order to continue to function. Thus, when Richard reclaims his wife, he not

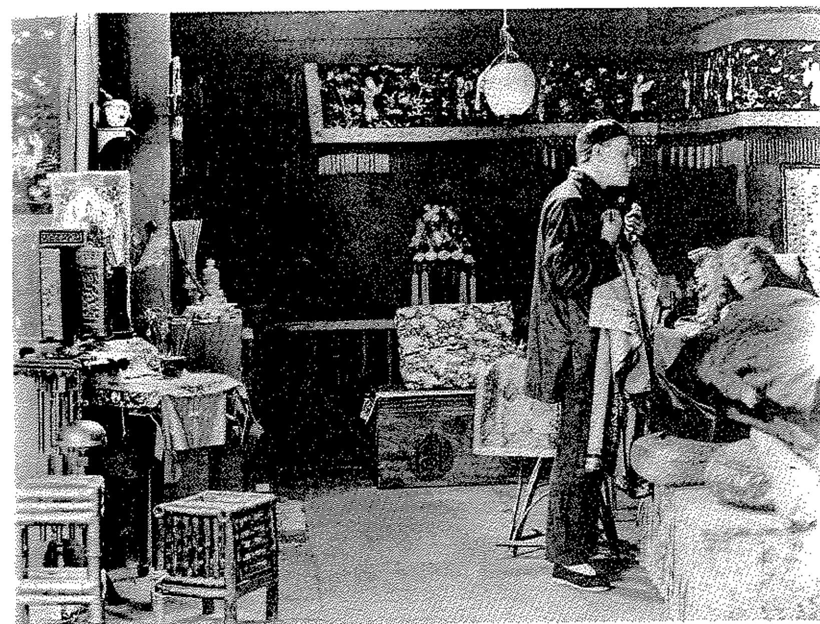

Figure 3. Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess) reverently caresses a Chinese gown worn by Lucy (Lillian Gish), who is enthroned in his lavish bedroom. Still from Broken Blossoms *(1919) courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.*

only brings a wayward woman back into the patriarchal fold but also brings the "new woman" consumer, who can assert her own identity and independence through the creation of herself in the purchase of commodities, back into a male-defined bourgeois order that still maintains an element of Victorian restraint.

For the viewer, *The Cheat* itself may promise the momentary possession of a beautiful, exotic commodity. Elegantly lighted, sumptuously decorated, sensuously displayed images excite the imagination and provide a fantasy world in which leisure and consumerism reign supreme. Perhaps seated in a movie theater itself decorated with exotic trappings, rubbing elbows with patrons from different social classes, indulging in a fantasy of cosmopolitanism, the text's sensationalism coupled with its lurid presentation of the rape-lynching fantasy might take on a certain irony.

Clearly, *The Cheat* can be looked at as a raw and direct call for racist exclusionism and a necessarily sadistic restraint of the newly independent woman for "her own good." However, the opulent and seductive world of Japanese splendor coupled with American commodity capitalism and linked to a sadomasochistic play with traditional racial and gender positions might conjure up different fantasies, creating a more ambivalent picture of the economic, social, political, and cultural order of the day.

Broken Blossoms: Sexual Perversity and Spiritual Salvation

D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919) has sparked more critical interest than any other film in this study. Based on Thomas Burke's story, "The Chink and the Child," from his collection *Limehouse Nights* on the slum areas of London, *Broken Blossoms* tells a lurid tale of the love of a Chinese, opium-smoking merchant for the abused illegitimate daughter of a brutal boxer.

Given the links between American and British relations with China, the fact that an English story about the Limehouse slums should strike a responsive cord with Griffith and the 1919 film audience should come as no surprise. Since the time of Marco Polo, European trade with China has had an impact on the cultures of both the West and Asia. Tea, silk, and porcelain, in fact, put Britain so in debt to China that England encouraged illegal commerce in its opium from India to redress the trade imbalance. When the trade began to reach epidemic proportions, the Chinese imperial government launched a campaign to suppress it militarily, leading to the Opium War of 1840–1842 and the Treaty of Nanjing that forced China to concede lucrative ports

and special privileges to the West. Also involved in the opium trade, American merchants benefited greatly from this blow to Chinese sovereignty. The commercial opening of China further led to increased contact more generally, and missionaries from the United States as well as Great Britain poured into China along with merchants, sailors, and a legion of bureaucrats. Ironically, the missionaries went to China to save it from the "decadence" of its pagan ways, including, of course, the opium use that the West had helped to promote.

In light of the pressure of these colonialist incursions and the internal strife occasioned by the decay of the Manchu-ruled Qing Dynasty, the impoverishment of China seemed certain, and many Chinese, particularly from the southern coastal areas, went to Britain, Australia, and America to seek their fortunes. Many went to California in search of gold and stayed on as laborers to work on the American railroads. However, owing in part to the political weakness of China internationally and racist elements within the labor movement of the latter part of the nineteenth century, the U.S. government instituted a series of exclusionary laws to keep out the Chinese. Those who did manage to stay or enter illegally tended to live isolated lives in the Chinatowns of major metropolitan areas. In Great Britain, an inhospitable climate led to similar conditions, so that the Limehouse of Burke's story would certainly strike a responsive cord with anyone familiar with Chinatown in San Francisco, New York, or in the pulp fiction of the time.[33]

Unlike the short story, however, which simply tries to sketch slum life for the prurient imaginations of outsiders, *Broken Blossoms* attempts to make a moral lesson and elevate the characters and situations of the original story into the realm of what critics have called "poetry" or "art."[34] In addition to the early praise it received as an "art film," *Broken Blossoms* has been studied seriously by film scholars interested in Griffith as an auteur,[35] Lillian Gish as a performer,[36] the production and commercial exploitation of the film as "high art,"[37] its contribution to the history of cinematography with the use of the soft focus Sartov lens,[38] the relationship of the film to melodrama,[39] the importance of the film to the history of Asian representations in the cinema,[40] as well as the film's depiction of gender relations.[41]

Perhaps the most telling studies of the film, however, have dealt with it as a tale of sexual perversity or as an example of Griffith's own well-documented penchant for young girls as objects of erotic desire.[42] Indeed, in many ways, the film can be looked at as a catalog of what society considers as sexual crimes, excesses, or perversions, including rape, incest, sadism, masochism, pedophilia, necrophilia, fetishism, voyeurism, and prostitution as well as miscegenation. In fact, given this list of sexual deviations, interracial sexuality, which remains on the

level of controlled lust and innocent affection, may be the most innocuous part of the fantasy.

Given the very thinly disguised sexual deviations depicted in the film, approaching *Broken Blossoms* as a pornographic text seems appropriate. Like pornography, *Broken Blossoms* uses spectacle to arouse the sexual interest of the spectator, while narrative structure permits, controls, and legitimizes this arousal by symbolically punishing the principals (and through them the viewer who identifies with them) for their erotic excesses. However, spectacle wins out, and the evocation of an atmosphere, an image, a feeling that stimulates the erotic involvement of the male viewer takes precedence over the moral imperatives of the plot.

By looking at the erotic fantasies depicted in *Broken Blossoms* in their rawest form, the text's ambivalent treatment of the relationship between sexuality and race may also be exposed. The film is a contradictory mix of high-minded moralizing and lasciviousness, of racial stereotypes and pleas for tolerance, of aestheticism and exploitative violence.

Rape and Lynching: *The Cheat* and *Broken Blossoms*

In many ways, *Broken Blossoms* is the obverse of *The Cheat* and a part of Griffith's post-*The Birth of a Nation* response to charges of racism. While DeMille's *The Cheat*, like *The Birth of a Nation*, argues for a racist exclusionism upheld by violence, *Broken Blossoms*, like Griffith's epic *Intolerance* (1916), attempts to make a case for racial tolerance and respect for foreign cultures. While *The Cheat* sees the intrusion of Asia into American culture as a threat to the white, bourgeois, patriarchal family, *Broken Blossoms* sees the Western patriarchy as a site of violence, decay, and exploitation. Rather than lionizing capitalism and consumerism as the source of new vitality for the bourgeois home, *Broken Blossoms* depicts the poverty and squalor of the proletariat and subproletariat as a hopeless mire that the traditional, bourgeois, domestic virtues can do little to remedy. Ostensibly, the film seems to present the West as brutal, violent, racist, and corrupt and criticizes it for its base treatment of women and outsiders. It praises Asia for its elevated sense of morality and white women for their virtue and purity.

However, underneath this plea for racial harmony and compassion for women can be found a rape-lynching fantasy remarkably similar to the "Bible Belt pornography" that propels the narratives of both *The Cheat* and *The Birth of a Nation*. Like *The Cheat*, *Broken Blossoms* deals with a relationship triangle. Like Tori, Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess), referred to in the credits as the "Yellow Man" and called "Chinkie" in the titles, is a merchant, associated with the forbidden sensuality and decadence of Asia. Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp), like Richard Hardy, represents the Western patriarch who is losing control of the woman in his charge. Lucy (Lillian Gish), like Edith Hardy, acts as a token of property, power, and moral legitimacy that circulates between them. Like Edith, she seeks solace from the Asian merchant because of inadequacies in her own household. Edith, however, escapes from boredom and a relatively minor shortage of petty cash, whereas Lucy tries to escape from poverty, regular beatings, and implicit sexual abuse. Just as Tori and Richard Hardy struggle to possess Edith sexually, Cheng Huan and Battling Burrows vie for Lucy.

Broken Blossoms begins with the idealistic Cheng Huan departing China to bring the message of Buddhist tolerance and passivity to the West. Yet after unsuccessfully trying to stop a fight between some American sailors while still in China, Cheng Huan seems doomed to failure from the outset. The film then cuts years later to the Limehouse district of London, where Cheng Huan has become a merchant and opium smoker. He becomes enamored of Lucy there, as she pitifully tries to stretch her meager allowance while shopping in Chinatown. When her father nearly beats her to death, she escapes to Chinatown and collapses in front of Cheng Huan's shop. He takes her in and treats her like a goddess. At one point, overtaken by lust, Cheng Huan advances on the innocent Lucy but pulls back before violating her purity. When Burrows learns of his daughter's whereabouts, he becomes enraged, takes her away from Cheng Huan's shop, and beats her to death back at his own hovel. Cheng Huan exacts revenge by shooting Burrows. He carries Lucy's body back to Chinatown and commits suicide next to her corpse.

As the basic elements of *Broken Blossom*'s plot indicate, hidden complications of *The Cheat*'s rape fantasy, buried behind a facade that denies the power of the association between the white Edith and the Asian Tori as victims of white, patriarchal power, surface in the Griffith film. Kindred spirits, Lucy and Cheng Huan, like Tori and Edith, share a bond of aestheticism and sensual delight in objects of beauty. Like Tori, Cheng Huan embodies the "feminine" qualities linked in the Western imagination with a passive, carnal, occult, and duplicitous Asia. Cheng Huan is feminized in the film not only by his close association with the world of women but also by his elaborate, exotic dress, his languid posture and gestures, and the use of soft focus and diffuse lighting to render his features less angular, more

"womanly." However, while this bond is severed by the eruption of Tori's very masculine libido in *The Cheat*, the relationship between Lucy and Cheng Huan remains (as an intertitle states) a "pure and holy thing" as Cheng Huan draws back before consummating his love for Lucy.

Nevertheless, just as Tori's branding of Edith functions as a rape, Cheng Huan's ominous advance on Lucy and last minute sublimation of his desire, indicated by his kissing the hem of her sleeve rather than her lips, also symbolically marks his possession of the white woman. Battling Burrows reacts to the theft of Lucy as a rape. A title reads: "Battling discovers parental rights—A Chink after his kid! He'll learn him!" The enraged father, then, summons the aid of two of his cronies to form a "lynch mob" to avenge this wrong and retrieve Lucy. An ironic title encourages the viewer to distance himself or herself from Burrows's racist rage: "Above all, Battling hates those not born in the same great country as himself." Thus, the authorial voice of the intertitles promotes a reading that sees Burrows as a racist brute rather than as a brutal but still rightly possessive father. However, in light of Hollywood's consistent support of the rights and virtues of the patriarchy, this vilification of the parental role, no matter how excessively violent its manifestation, must conjure up a certain ambivalence for many in the audience.

In fact, it is Burrows's own sexual brutality that controls this aspect of the fantasy so that the film can make its ostensible moral point. Cheng Huan's "rape" of Lucy only loses its potential power to enrage a viewer prone to be outraged by the thought of miscegenation because Burrows also functions as a "rapist" in the text. Thus, if Cheng Huan can be looked at as the nonwhite rapist and Burrows as the enraged white patriarch, then the opposite formulation is also possible. Battling Burrows's incestuous, sadomasochistic rituals with Lucy are depicted as even more "perverse" than Cheng Huan's lustful adoration.

While the climactic scene in which Burrows hacks his way into the closet in which Lucy hides, grabs her, and beats her to death on the bed in their hovel has often been looked at as a symbolic rape, Julia Lesage has noted that the mise-en-scène of earlier scenes in *Broken Blossoms* also encourages the interpretation of Burrows's abuse of his daughter as sexual in nature. As Lesage notes,

> The first time Burrows beats Lucy, he grabs a whip from under the mattress and stands in the centre of the room, holding the whip at penis height. . . .
>
> Lucy tries to create a diversion by telling him there is dust on his shoes. She bends down to wipe off his shoes with her dress. Here, the change in composition from one shot to another connotes the act of fellatio. In the long shot before Lucy wipes the shoes, the whip hangs almost to the floor. But in the close-up of her wiping the shoes, the whip's tail is at the height of Burrows's penis, and as Lucy raises her face the whip swings past her lips. As Burrows grabs Lucy's arms and throws her towards the bed near the closet, the whip is again between his legs at penis height. We see blurred, orgiastic shots of him beating her senseless.[43]

If Cheng Huan's advances on Lucy approach rape, then Burrows's abuse of his daughter also approximates rape. Just as Burrows calls together his cronies to form a lynch mob to attack Cheng Huan and retrieve Lucy, Cheng Huan also is cast in the role of avenger of the white woman when he tries to rescue Lucy from her father. As Burrows tears down the closet door to get at Lucy, Cheng Huan collects himself, gets a pistol, and goes to Lucy's aid. Crosscutting between Cheng Huan in the streets of Limehouse, Lucy pitifully running in circles in the closet and Burrows with his ax, the montage pattern established at this point brings *Broken Blossoms* close to the parallel editing associated with Griffith's "last minute rescues" in other films. However, in this case, given that Lucy has been doubly violated and that neither Cheng Huan nor Burrows can function as the avenging patriarch who can save the purity of white womanhood for the perpetuation of the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, ruling elect, the "rescue" seems pointless. Indeed, Lucy dies before Cheng Huan can arrive.

Although Cheng Huan does manage to avenge Lucy's death by shooting Burrows, this inverted "lynching" of the white father by the Asian male loses much of its force as Cheng Huan returns to his emasculated, passive, masochistic position when he commits suicide on the floor next to Lucy's corpse. This scene, in fact, is crosscut with Burrows's buddies at the police station enlisting the help of the authorities to avenge Burrows's death. Ironically, the official authorities finally appear in the film after all the violent action has taken place. As in many rape-lynching fantasies, the legitimate agents of the government are shown to be ineffectual in keeping the racial and sexual order intact. In this case, Cheng Huan punishes himself symbolically for his transgression through suicide, usurping the role of the state and essentially "lynching" himself.

Like *The Cheat*, then, *Broken Blossoms* maintains a fundamental separation between Asia and the West played out dramatically and violently through a doomed romance in which the effeminate Asian man finds a "perverse" potency in his desire for an unobtainable Caucasian woman. Just as Tori's entrance into American high society marks

a transgression of the barriers separating the races, Cheng Huan's emigration from an idyllic China of temple bells, Buddhist statues, and innocent maidens dooms him to the "hell" of Limehouse. As in *The Cheat*, it is the mixture of cultures that indicates a disturbance in the social order. Just as the American sailors wreak havoc in China in the film's opening scenes, Cheng Huan reemerges in England as a grotesque, as alien to British society as the sailors were out of place in the quaint and idealized China of the film. The intrusion of one culture into the other's domain marks the narrative disequilibrium.

In *Broken Blossoms*, the "perversity" of Limehouse is indicated by the opium den that Cheng Huan frequents "where the Orient squats at the portals of the West," as a title indicates. Interracial couples smoke opium together; drugged Caucasian women are shown in languid, sexually suggestive poses. Opium indicates the intrusion of Asia into the West as an unwelcome passivity, sensuality, mystery, and languor.

Although there does seem to be a clear line drawn between the sympathetic Cheng Huan and the villainous Burrows, it cannot be denied that both are creatures of Limehouse. As Burrows flirts and drinks with the "loose" women who also frequent the opium den and as his daughter Lucy is mesmerized by the material pleasures of Chinatown, it becomes quite clear that part of what makes Limehouse and its inhabitants disturbing and peculiar to the middle-class outsider is the erasure of social boundaries between the races. The film's ostensible call for racial tolerance becomes clouded by its insistence that any meeting of Asia and the West must somehow be either violent or "perverse." Thus, it can be argued that *Broken Blossoms*'s bleak view of Limehouse goes beyond a bourgeois suspicion of the working classes whose poverty must somehow be linked ideologically to moral inadequacy rather than to economic exploitation by the ruling order. Limehouse is not only a threat because it is a slum but also because it creates an environment in which the unprotected white virgin can be possessed by the Asian other. Burrows's dissipation and Lucy's inability to escape her father spring from this Limehouse ambience in which troubled families, prostitution, brutality, shiftlessness, and opium all become part of a "perverted," culturally and racially mixed slum.

Thus, while *Broken Blossoms* seems to praise Asian sensitivity and passivity and condemn Western callousness and violence, a closer look at the rape-lynching fantasy reveals a deeper, less liberal perspective. Stripped to its barest elements, *Broken Blossoms* still features the white virgin exposed and humiliated by contact with a man of another race, who loses his life for daring to presume he could possess her. While seeming to condemn the hypocritical white patriarch Burrows for his misplaced desire to avenge the "wrong" done his daughter

through her contact with Cheng Huan, the text also allows that "wrong" to be symbolically avenged by Cheng Huan's suicide and tacit acceptance of his own culpability in loving a woman forbidden to him.

The Victorian Cult of the Virgin Child

The film makes a good deal out of the forbidden nature of Cheng Huan's love for Lucy as springing from racial differences. Burrows becomes enraged when he learns of his daughter's relationship with the Chinese merchant supposedly because he abhors Asians. However, the more obvious fact of their tremendous difference in age is never voiced in the text. Rather, pedophilia, as part of the Victorian cult of the virgin child, becomes a "natural" part of Cheng Huan's supposedly "pure and holy" attraction to Lucy.

As Ronald Pearsall notes in *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality*, this "cult of the little girl" was a common aspect of Victorian sexual life:

> The nineteenth century was especially replete with gentlemen who had for girl children an overwhelming penchant, and when these men were respectable such attachments were treated as if they were ordained by God. When these men were of the literary persuasion, the rationalization became even more involved, and the refusal to face the fact that passionate involvements with immature girls argued some personality defect resulted in some curious and tortuous thinking.[44]

While authors like Lewis Carroll and John Ruskin wrote tomes in praise of the virtues of young girls, brothels specializing in child prostitutes thrived. Some syphilitic men believed that intercourse with a virgin would provide a cure, and the trade in "virgins" (both genuine and fake) reached epidemic proportions.

In fiction, the virgin girl functions both as a passive victim, inviting her own rape and martyrdom, and as an unsullied angel, sentimentally protected and cherished by her high-minded and lascivious mentor. She is purity personified, youth untouched, and the victim of a sadistic, unchecked, male lust. Within the cult dedicated to her, she acts as a sign of spiritual transcendence through a pruriently rooted desire. Perversity becomes saintliness, and her lover's sexual passion fuels his religious fervor. Through this infatuation with the virgin child, any guilt associated with sexuality could be denied, since the girl would presumably be innocent and unaware of any sexual feelings. Moreover, the potential threats that a relationship with a mature woman might entail could be completely avoided.

Although Griffith, perhaps responding to Lillian Gish's reluctance to play the role of a child, makes Burke's thirteen-year-old heroine into a fifteen-year-old,[45] Lucy still functions in the film as the virgin child, angel and martyr, humiliated victim and elevated object of desire. True to the ambivalence of the Victorian formulation of this figure, *Broken Blossoms*'s plot alternates between sadistic and fetishistic fantasies of the violated and unobtainable virgin. As Robert Lang notes in his analysis of the film in *American Film Melodrama: Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli*, Cheng Huan represents the desire to possess the child as a fetish object, the castrating potential of sexual desire belied by his religious elevation of her image. Lang observes,

> He keeps her always at a distance, in a disavowal of knowledge, as a defense. Burrows's response to the threat she represents is sadistic; his desire is to tear the loved object apart, whereas the Yellow Man's response is fetishistic. His drive . . . is . . . to make of Lucy a representation.[46]

Having gone to Britain on a religious mission and failed, Cheng Huan finds spiritual salvation in the form of a little girl whom he worships like a saint and lusts after like a whore.

Given that pedophilia is one of society's most detested sexual perversions and that the elevation of the pure child one of Christianity's favored avenues to spiritual enlightenment, the fact that *Broken Blossoms* should teeter between the two and use a sadistic depiction of child abuse to counter the equally "perverse," fetishistic worship of the child seems appropriate. Religion and an unexplainable brutality mask the desire to sexually possess a child. As Nick Browne points out in his discussion of *Broken Blossoms* in "Griffith's Family Discourse: Griffith and Freud," religion and sexual perversity are inextricably linked within the narrative and made concrete within the film's mise-en-scène.

> The central trope through which the narrative takes on thematic significance is this religious one. It is this trope which founds the complex metaphoric system of the film. Its compostion is condensed in the contrast between two versions of a common place: this central symbolic site is the bed, the one in the Yellow Man's upstairs room which serves as an altar, and the one in her father's house on which she is attacked and dies. The central terms of symbolic expression in the film, high and low, priest and animal, ecstatic worship and incestuous violation, constitute the diacritical coordinates of the space and action of the film.[47]

The first time the film shows Lucy and Cheng Huan encountering one another is during what the intertitles describe as a "shopping trip" for Lucy—a pitiful foray into Chinatown to buy vegetables and maybe

"something extra" with tinfoil she has collected. Lucy tarries in front of Cheng Huan's shop to look at a collection of dolls in his window. A title reads: "The Yellow Man watched Lucy often. The beauty which all Limehouse missed smote him to the heart." Framed by the shop window, Lucy herself resembles the coveted dolls. She is a beautiful coveted object under scrutiny, passive and fragile, framed by the window and similarly displayed. Moreover, the fact that the fifteen-year-old Lucy still craves dolls underscores her immaturity, innocence, and desire to remain a child, that is, beyond the potentially disturbing threats of adult womanhood. Earlier warned against and implicitly rejecting both marriage and prostitution, Lucy is trapped as a child, doomed to remain "pure," and fetishized like the lifeless dolls at which she gazes. To underscore Cheng Huan's supposedly "pure" interest in Lucy, the narrative introduces the character of Evil Eye (Edward Peil), who leers at Lucy out of an obviously prurient interest. As Cheng Huan steps between Lucy and Evil Eye on the street, he acts to rid the fantasy of the voyeuristic overtones of Cheng Huan's (and the viewer's) own interest in looking at the child Lucy. Paralleling the opposition between Burrows's sadistic sexual possession of Lucy and Cheng Huan's fetishistic worship, here Cheng Huan's desire to gaze at Lucy is rid of the sadistic implications of the voyeur's wish to uncover and possess rather than simply reverently look upon the beloved specular object.

Also, in this sequence, the film's titular metaphor comes into play. A title reads: "The Spirit of Beauty breaks her blossoms all about his chamber." The "broken" of the film's title conjures up the duality of the sadistic-fetishistic nature of the fantasy. On the one hand, Lucy is sentimentally equated with the beauty of the immature flower, not yet in bloom, as she tries to purchase a small bud in exchange for her tin foil. Later, Cheng Huan regales her with flowers and calls her his "White Blossom," making her an object of his aesthetic contemplation. Like the shop window dolls, the flowers help to situate Lucy in the text as a beautiful object, an appropriate image for aesthetic contemplation ostensibly superseding any forbidden erotic interest.

On the other hand, she is also a "broken" blossom—abused, humiliated, tattered, and trampled. From this perspective, Lucy can be looked on as the victimized beauty, ravaged and inviting her own inevitable destruction. In fact, the scene in which Lucy attempts to purchase her flower as Evil Eye leers at her is intercut with a scene in which Burrows counters his manager's admonitions against his drinking with the ironic line, "Wot yer expect me to do—pick violets?" In the following scene, Burrows metaphorically "picks" Lucy by beating her with his phallic whip.

The aesthetic nature of the flower metaphor, moreover, helps to situate the pedophilic fantasy within the realm of the secular religion of beauty and poetry to further mask its perverse roots. When Lucy seeks asylum at Cheng Huan's shop, a florid title interrupts the action: "Oh, lily flowers and plum blossoms! Oh silver streams and dim-starred skies!" In the two shot that follows, Cheng Huan peers into Lucy's face and holds his hands before her fallen, battered body as if in prayer. He draws his face near hers but turns his head away just before his lips touch hers. Throughout Lucy looks puzzled and a bit distressed at Cheng Huan's amorous behavior, and, later, a title points to her complete innocence: "What makes you so good to me, Chinky?"

In the struggle between pedophilic desire and religious transcendence, Cheng Huan's bed serves as both altar and battleground. Immobilized by her father's abuse, Lucy becomes one of Cheng Huan's shop window dolls on display for his visual contemplation and adoration, an object of lust and veneration. He orientalizes her by dressing her in a Chinese brocaded robe, shoes, and hair ornament, worshiping her with gifts of flowers, tea, and burning incense. He dances in the moonlight, plays the flute for her, and sleeps at the foot of her bed reverently holding one of her hands. He kneels at her bedside and looks up at her, hands clasped in prayer. In other words, he uses the child to create a narcissistic image for his own contemplation, as static, atavistic, sensuous, and dangerously inviting as any Hollywood conception of the Asian other could be. Cheng Huan gives Lucy a mirror to contemplate her own beauty and a doll to clutch, which symbolically parallels her own situation as a cherished but lifeless object.

Not only to perpetuate the religious cover to the fantasy but also to continue an indulgence in the fetishism itself, Cheng Huan must pull back before disturbing his saintly child's virginal innocence. Not to do so would break the illusion and destroy Lucy's passive potency in the text. However, not to recognize the tension would perhaps go too far in either denying a racist belief in the Asian man's supposedly innate sexual depravity or robbing the drama completely of its effect by denying Cheng Huan any internal conflict over his possession of Lucy. As Julia Lesage notes, the title that follows Cheng Huan's aborted attempt at sexual contact with Lucy confirms the erotic passion of the scene by denying it.

> Significantly overapologizing for the man's sexual intent, the intertitle announces: "His love remains a pure and holy thing—even his worst foe says this." In fact the title makes no sense, because no one at the time knew that Lucy was there, and later her father and his friends just assumed that a sexual relation had taken place. Griffith seems to use the

Figure 4. Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp) rips Lucy from her closet sanctuary before he kills her. Still from Broken Blossoms *courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.*

> title to deny the sequence's visual explicitness, yet this very denial creates suspicion about and thus confirms the reality of that sexual passion which the sequence has both presented and repressed.[48]

Although the passion contained in the relationship erupts briefly here and again when the otherwise passive Cheng Huan shoots Burrows, this self-contained, distanced, aesthetic love affair finds its ultimate expression in the final suicide scene. As a lovely corpse adorned in her Asian finery, Lucy embodies both the end result of the sadistic and fetishistic aspects of the pedophilic fantasy. Thus, she has been completely destroyed physically and frozen in time as a child. She has become the perfect fetish that will never represent the demands of an adult woman, sacrificed to perpetuate a myth of transcendent innocence to deny the threatening aspect of a forbidden sexuality. Cheng Huan builds a Buddhist shrine on his bed next to Lucy's dead body. He lights incense in front of a small statue of Buddha, reads from a religious text, touches it to his forehead reverently, ritualistically, looks up at his angelic, dead Lucy, and plunges a dagger into his chest. His last pseudoreligious act of perversity, then, is necrophilic in nature. His suicide, performed with a smile on his face at the side of his beloved corpse, is orgasmic. The final shots of a Chinese monk striking a temple bell and the misty harbor of Cheng Huan's hometown contribute to the text's ostensible point that Cheng Huan has achieved some sort of religious salvation. However, this return to the spiritual cannot belie the erotic passions conjured up by the film and the inextricable link between pedophilia, the symbolic sexual possession of the white virgin child, and Cheng Huan's miraculous renewal of faith.

Made during the final days of World War I (with references to war casualties and munitions workers), *Broken Blossoms* seems to be part of the rhetoric of universalism, pacificism, and tolerance that formed part of the Versailles Treaty and League of Nations political discourses then current.[49] Given the deep-rooted hatred of the Chinese prevalent in the American popular media since the mid-nineteenth century, the fact that Cheng Huan could emerge as a sympathetic character in *Broken Blossoms* likely would be linked to this broader public interest in burying the hatchet and accepting former enemies as brothers. Thus, Cheng Huan could really be marked as an "outsider" in any respect and function in the same way in the text as the romantic, troubled aesthete saved by the sanctity of the pure, white virgin. The specifics of Cheng Huan's Chinese ethnicity and racial difference simply add a veneer of exoticism to *Broken Blossoms*, encouraging a familiar fantasy of Asia as feminine, passive, carnal, and perverse.

As in many subsequent texts featuring an interracial romance between Asians and Anglo-Americans, the "whiteness" and pure innocence of the Caucasian woman elevates and enobles the "base" qualities of the Asian other. Lucy, in *Broken Blossoms*, becomes the token of Cheng Huan's moral salvation through the beauty of romance. Thus, despite its critique of Western brutality and masculine cruelty, the film remains rooted in the very Western ideology of romance where spiritual salvation rests on the possession of the white woman even if that inevitably means total destruction for the man of color who loves her. The West, then, again "saves" the inferior, dependent, lost Asian male by annihilating him.